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IN THE NATION

Voting Down Ideas

By Tom Wicker

Where, if not on the college campus, should ideas be openly and freely heard and debated? Who, more than students and faculty, should uphold that ideal of the campus as an open forum for all views?

Free expression is doubly diminished, therefore, by the actions of students and faculty at Barnard and Smith colleges in opposing for political reasons the honors the two schools had offered to Jeane Kirkpatrick, the Reagan Administration's chief delegate to the United Nations.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick also was booed and heckled off the stage when she recently tried to speak at the University of California in Berkeley. In view of student and faculty opposition, she has refused the Barnard and Smith honors with the laconic, scathing observation that "a university or college is in the most basic sense defined by its faculty and students."

At Barnard, more than 1,000 students had signed a petition protesting a medal to be awarded Mrs. Kirkpatrick, a Barnard alumna. The faculty voted its disapproval of the award, 48 to 18.

At Smith, where student political opposition already had led her to cancel a scheduled commencement address, an honorary doctorate was offered her by school trustees. About half the faculty then signed a petition of disapproval.

There's no doubt why students and faculty at both schools acted as they did. Theirs is political opposition to an idea — to Mrs. Kirkpatrick's controversial views on Central American affairs, apparently a large factor in the Reagan Administration's policy toward that region.

No one would argue that Mrs. Kirkpatrick is not distinguished as an academician and as a writer in her field. No one would argue that she is not a woman of high ability and achievement, first in education, now in government. No one would argue that she's too controversial; colleges have awarded countless honors to persons holding views at least as hotly debated as hers.

Nor can it be argued that academic honors are so precious that they should go only to the purest and the noblest. Colleges and universities routinely hand them out to large donors, to influential politicians, to important trustees and to commencement speakers, in lieu of a fee.

(At the University of Kentucky there's even an old joke about a proposal to award a doctorate to one of that state's great thoroughbred race horses. "It would be," the university president is supposed to have said, "the first time we ever gave a degree to a whole horse.")

No, the opposition to honors for Mrs. Kirkpatrick is *political*. The opposition believes that her ideas are unsuitable or inferior or immoral or something, and therefore should not be heard, or their author honored, at Smith or Barnard. But what then becomes of the ideal of an open forum for ideas? And should there be a change in the political atmosphere, what idea and what person might be considered politically unacceptable next time?

Not too many years ago, the State Legislature approved a ban on Communist speakers at the University of North Carolina. I and other graduates, together with faculty, administrators, students and many who had no connection with the university, spoke, wrote and fought against that so-called "speaker ban" until it was lifted. I don't see much difference between the *attitude* of the Smith and Barnard opposition and that of the Legislature that voted the restriction; they both wanted certain ideas to be banned from the campus.

Political debate, including opposition to government policy, is the essence of democracy; but so is free expression. Students and faculty at Smith and Barnard don't have to listen to Mrs. Kirkpatrick if they don't want to; but they don't have to stifle the speech or the recognition of someone with a differing view in order to express their own. They can vote; they can make sure their legislators know of their opposition to aid to the Salvadoran Army and police, or to the C.I.A.-sponsored forces in Nicaragua; they can take part in rallies, teach-ins, political activism, political campaigns.

That they acted as they did, however, suggests one "Vietnam parallel" of which even the Reagan Administration should be wary — the likelihood of an outraged, embittered, sometimes intolerant opposition to its military approach to Central America.

As in the years of the Vietnam peace movement, development of such an opposition will only be fostered by an Administration that circumvents Congress and shortcuts constitutional procedures; that overstates its case with doubtful "facts" and exaggerated claims about its clients and their "progress" toward democracy; that invokes a so-called "moral obligation" and the "national honor" in the cause of repressive and sometimes murderous forces who cannot be disguised as "good guys" or "freedom fighters."

Nothing is more divisive than such tactics, hence more self-defeating. In a democracy, Presidents can't for long fight a war — even by proxy — when the public and Congress won't support it.

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